

More than telling stories:
Learning practice in HIV&AIDS work in sub Saharan Africa

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Certificate of Authorship/Originality

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

Research work and the preparation of the thesis itself have been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

Signature of Candidate

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This thesis is the product of my passion to make a difference in the world working alongside those living on the margins. For more than half my life I have lived, laughed and cried with friends and colleagues from diverse cultural backgrounds and walks of life. Some of my richest times of learning HIV&AIDS work have been in the most unlikely places: sitting together under mango and baobab trees, on long road trips to remote villages, and during home visits and gatherings in rustic church and community buildings. Together we have dreamed, ached, disagreed and prayed in these “out of the way” places where real people are changing the world. Their stories may never be heard by more than a few, yet these creative and hardworking people at the grassroots are bringing enduring hope and transformation to individuals, families and communities living with HIV&AIDS. Such shared relational experiences learning HIV&AIDS work became the foundation for my investigation of learning practice.

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Abstract

This thesis is an empirical study of how HIV&AIDS program managers and staff in faith-based programs in community settings in sub Saharan Africa learn in the context of challenging and changing work conditions. An integrated narrative-practice inquiry approach in the interpretive tradition is used to co-create narratives of the experiences of program managers and staff learning HIV&AIDS prevention, home-based care of people living with HIV&AIDS, and the support and care for orphans and vulnerable children. These are generated using a two-stage process over two years, involving interviews, focus groups, document analysis and observing practitioners in their workplace.

Drawing on practice theory and the work of Schatzki and Kemmis, this research empirically demonstrates key features of learning practice: embodied, relational, materially mediated, situated and contextual, and prefigured and emergent. Learning is activity and action. Whilst “involving yourself” seeking and giving advice, modelling and mentoring, and “having a go” through trial and error are primary learning activities, learning HIV&AIDS work is shown as more than an aggregation of these. Learning activities are dynamically organized and shaped around “walking the talk”, rules, and making skills and experience count. The integrated and value-permeated nature of learning is highlighted. Relationships of space, purpose and intentionality between learning and other practices are explored along with relationships between learning and material objects. In addition, contextualization to the past, present and future are addressed.

Workplace learning in sub Saharan contexts is shown here to be always integrated through the interconnectedness of people, learning activities, relationships, other practices and material objects. In addition values including ethics, morals and matters of faith – under-theorized in learning and practice literature – are shown to permeate and shape learning practice.

Commonly assumed learning dichotomies are found to be inseparable and mutually constituted rather than distinct forms of learning. Learning is shown to emerge in unanticipated and unpredictable ways, persisting yet transformed through rhythms and cycles, and going beyond

metaphors of acquisition and participation. This has particular implications for practitioners learning to transition from HIV&AIDS exceptionalism to the integration of HIV&AIDS into normal health services.